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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE PANDITH SPEAKS TO
STUDENTS, MEDIA

REF: (A) ASTANA 1912
(B) ASTANA 1618

ASTANA 00001935 001.2 OF 002

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: During her October 13 visit to Almaty, Special Representative to Muslim Communities (SRMC) Farah Pandith broke new ground by visiting Kazakhstan's only Islamic University and engaging the students in a lively discussion on Muslims in the United States. Muskie and Flex alumni told SRMC Pandith that Islam is the new "fashion" among Kazakh youth even though most only attend mosques on high holidays. Kazakh academics welcomed President Obama's new engagement with Muslim communities and highlighted the importance of education in the combat with extremism. Kazakhstan's new Islamic TV channel and Kazakh-language print media positively covered SRMC Pandith's visit. END SUMMARY.

WARM WELCOME AT ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY

13. (SBU) As part of her visit to Kazakhstan October 12-13 (ref A), Special Representative to Muslim Communities (SRMC) Farah Pandith received a warm welcome at the Nur-Mubarakh University in Almaty, Kazakhstan's only Islamic University. Meeting the first high-ranking U.S. government visitor to the university on its front steps, the director, Dr. Mahmoud Hegazi, and several professors whisked SRMC Pandith into the director's office where a full tea service awaited. As two students served sweets, Dr. Hegazi told SRMC Pandith that Nur Mubarakh University, a bilateral Kazakhstan-Egyptian university established in 2001, offers undergraduate degrees in several social sciences and graduate degrees in Arabic studies. Women are underrepresented, Dr. Hegazi asserted, at only a quarter of the university's 400 students. With a curriculum taught in English, Russian, Kazakh, and Arabic, many of the university's graduates utilize their language skills to pursue careers in business, public relations, and the media.

14. (SBU) Dr. Hegazi claimed that interest in Islam and Islamic studies is growing, because many young Kazakhs are striving to "rediscover their roots." He praised the Kazakhstani government for supporting educational institutions like his -- "You have to give people the information they seek, or someone else will." He advised

SRMC Pandith to "be cautious about generalizations. Kazakhstan is Muslim, but different -- it does not mix religion and politics," he said. (NOTE: SRMC Pandith heard similar views from Muslim civil society leaders in Astana (ref A). END NOTE.) Dr. Hegazi expressed an interest in closer cooperation with the Embassy and asked specifically for a training program for the university's six English professors. (NOTE: Post's Regional English Language Officer will pursue this welcome opportunity and inquire about the placement of an English-language fellow. END NOTE.)

STUDENTS ASK ABOUT MUSLIMS IN THE UNITED STATES

15. (SBU) After the meeting with Dr. Hegazi, SRMC Pandith spoke with a group of approximately 40 university students and several faculty members. Equal numbers of female and male students sat on separate sides of the room, exchanging jokes and laughter across the aisle. They exemplified the difference between younger post-independence Kazakhstanis and the older Soviet-educated generation, with all female students wearing head coverings while the older faculty members refrained. During the lively thirty-minute exchange, students peppered SRMC Pandith with questions in nearly-perfect English about Muslims in the United States. "Why are you visiting Kazakhstan?" "What kinds of Muslims live in the United States?" "Are there Muslim women's rights groups in the United States?" "What are your thoughts on girls wearing hijabs to school?" The students, clearly eager to learn more about the United States, continued to launch questions as Dr. Hegazi brought the meeting to a close.

ALUMNI SPEAK ON THE "FASHION" OF ISLAM

16. (SBU) Several alumni of Flex and Muskie programs called Islam the "new fashion" among educated Kazakh youth, with most only

ASTANA 00001935 002.2 OF 002

attending mosques for high holidays, "like Christmas for Christians." One participant asserted that the government's secret services (i.e. the Committee for National Security, KNB) remain "largely ignorant" of different teachings within Islam and tend to treat all "non-traditional" Muslims as extremist threats. All agreed about the rarity of religious extremist ideology in Kazakhstan. They ventured, however, that the growing divide between urban and rural income levels, and falling standards of education, could make the rural, primarily Kazakh, youth more susceptible to extremist views.

ACADEMICS WELCOME CAIRO SPEECH

17. (SBU) At a round-table with leading Kazakh academics and journalists from Kazakh-language newspapers, SRMC Pandith highlighted her office's mission to implement President Obama's vision articulated in his Cairo speech. Marat Tokashbeyev, the Editor-in-Chief of "President Zhane Khalyk" (The President and the People) Kazakh-language newspaper told SRMC Pandith, "We Muslims rejoiced at the Cairo speech." He asserted that the existing "friction" between the West and the Muslim world stems from the "West's unabashed support for Israel" and asked whether President Obama planned to change that policy. SRMC Pandith objected to his thesis, responding that the true root issue is "the use of religion for political purposes." Political scientist Murtaza Bulatay agreed, adding that all Muslim countries must adopt "the universal principles of Enlightenment." Mukhametzhan Tazabekov, director of the new Islamic television channel Assyl Arna, stressed that education, "like the one my channel is providing," is a key tool in the fight against extremism.

MEDIA OUTREACH

18. (SBU) SRMC Pandith held a short on-the-record question-and-answer session with journalists at the round-table. Much like the students at Islamic University, the journalists posed numerous questions about Muslims in the United States, the role of the government in regulating religion, and SRMC Pandith's strategy for implementation of President Obama's vision. SRMC Pandith also gave an exclusive television interview to the Assyl Arna channel. The subsequent, largely positive, press coverage included several

newspapers' highlighting the warming relations between the United States and Muslim world and quotations from SRMC Pandith on extremism, Muslim life in the United States, and the purpose of her office.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: President Obama's Cairo speech clearly reverberated widely among the Kazakhstani Muslims. We held several well-attended events on the occasion, and Muslim community leaders and Kazakh-language press positively responded to the Ambassador's Iftaar dinner (ref B). SRMC Pandith's outreach to students and community leaders built on this momentum, furthered our connection with Kazakhstan's growing population of young, observant, Kazakh-speaking Muslims, and started to respond to their intense curiosity about life in the United States. END COMMENT.

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